

Five Key Themes of the American Identity

FROM THE LECTURE SERIES: THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, 2ND EDITION

April 29, 2019 [American History](#), [History](#)

By [Gary W. Gallagher, Ph.D., University of Virginia](#); [Patrick N. Allitt, Ph.D., Emory University](#); and [Allen C. Guelzo, Ph.D., Gettysburg College](#)

The story of the United States contains knaves and nobility, cads and crusaders, and enough turbulence to upset entire governments. While it appears the nation is built on constant change, there exists constant themes that have helped to define our American identity.



(Image: Charles Brutlag/Shutterstock)

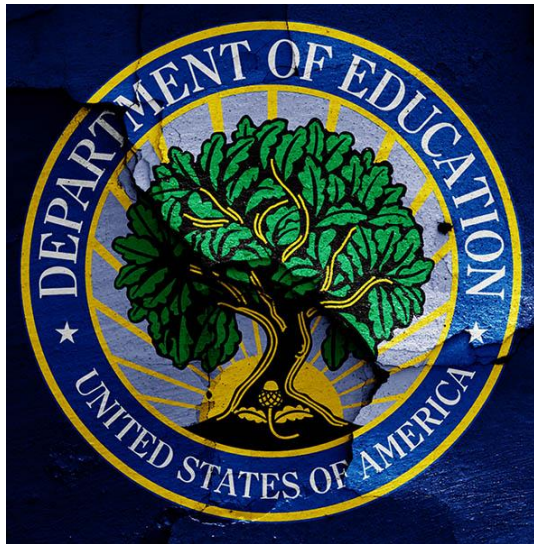
These key themes of American identity serve as the melody for our history and provide a narrative that helps us make sense of all the changes our country has seen.

Passion for Freedom

Now one thing which has been a continuing notion amid the changes in American history has been the American passion for freedom. That freedom has taken many different forms—political, religious, economic—and it's involved some very high-stakes risks; it hasn't been a foregone conclusion. Sometimes, in the case of the New England Puritans, the freedom people have been searching for in America has been the freedom to be un-free, in other words, the freedom to impose a new sense of order on a world that they found too chaotic and disorganized.

*This is a transcript from the video series *The History of the United States*, 2nd Edition. [Watch it now, on Wondrium.](#)*

Pursuit of Education



Education has been the classic American form of the opportunity to make of yourself whatever you wish. (Image: danielo/Shutterstock)

In whatever form, however, the search for freedom has been a fundamental urge at every point in American history, from the Pilgrims to the civil rights movement. Another basic theme has been the pursuit of education. This is linked to the pursuit of freedom. Once you've torn yourself away from the various kinds of bondage in the past, then it's up to you to fashion a new American identity for yourself. Education has been the classic American form of the opportunity to make of yourself whatever you wish.

Learn more about [the "American System"](#)

Faith in Popular Government

A third theme that shows up everywhere in American life is an unquestioned faith in the value of popular government. Call it democracy, republicanism, or what you will: Americans have never seriously doubted the right of people to rule themselves. It sometimes seems that we as Americans fight politically with each other like wild animals, but we've never fought over whether we should become a monarchy

or whether it would be a good idea to have a dictator. That's the moment when Americans immediately forget the issues they were fighting over and start fighting you, if what you're trying to do is impose a dictatorship, monarchy, or another form of government that is not a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Learn more about how [Congress took control of Reconstruction policy](#)

Willingness to Experiment

A fourth theme running through all of American history has been the tremendous willingness of Americans to experiment with new things. Living in a new environment, in a new world, in a new continent, with new rules to govern their conduct, the American identity has always shown a kind of forward-looking-ness, a special welcome to the new and the untried. They don't feel constrained by the habits of other peoples or of other times. It crops up in the ease with which Americans have assimilated wave upon wave of immigrants from a bewildering variety of backgrounds.

Learn more about [a place where European ideas of society no longer applied](#)

American Exceptionalism

The last theme builds on the other four. Americans have traditionally believed that, as a nation, that we are like nothing else the world has ever seen before. We are exceptional. We are exemplary. We are a "city on a hill." The American identity is linked to the first large-scale democratic republic in human history, and we made it work. While other nations were butchering each other over whether or not the Psalms should be sung in Latin or sung in French, we created a system of religious tolerance that put away the old religious conflicts of the past.

We also opened up our economic and political system to anyone with the brains and the talent to make a way forward, and we looked to things like that, not to the characteristics of hereditary aristocracy, but to people who had the brains, the talent, and were willing to put it to risk. That's what we have taken as our models.

Sometimes this sense of *exceptionalism* or being something different from what the rest of the world has done or been in the past can degenerate. It can degenerate into a kind of smug self-congratulation, or even self-righteousness, not just that we're different from others, but that we're better because we're different from others. This sentiment is what frequently grates on the ears of other peoples of other nations. Most of the time, however, that sense of being exceptional has also given to Americans a sense of having a national mission. It is the belief that what we are doing as a nation is not only different, and it's done not just for us, but for the rest of the world. It asserts that our country is worth loving, as Abraham Lincoln once said, not just because it is our country, but because it is a country of the free.

It is a country committed to a certain set of ideas, built around not a certain race or a certain ethnicity, but around a political document, the U.S. Constitution, and a constellation of political ideas captured for the first time in the Declaration of Independence.

That brings us back to that deep-seated passion for freedom. It is a passion that we can find present in American life and the American experience from the first moment that we began to think of ourselves as something different from Europe to the beginnings of a nation. This extends to the moment when, in 1492, a Genoese entrepreneur and navigator named Christopher Columbus caught his first glimpse of the island shores of what was, for him, a new world.